Former Filling Station, High Street, Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxfordshire

An Archaeological Watching Brief
for Country Visions OK Limited

by Sarah Coles and Steve Ford
Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd

Site Code HSD01/36

May 2002
Summary

**Site name:** Former filling station, High Street, Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxfordshire.

**Grid reference:** SU 5788 9410

**Site activity:** Watching Brief

**Date and duration of project:** 25th–29th April 2002

**Site supervisor:** Sarah Coles

**Site code:** HSD01/36

**Area of site:** 400sq. m

**Summary of results:** The lines of the ground beam trenches for the new building were excavated under archaeological supervision to their formation level. This partly exposed the surface levels of subsoil features. These subsoil features were mapped but were not otherwise excavated.

**Monuments identified:** Numerous intercutting pits and layers.

**Location and reference of archive:** The archive is currently held by Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd, 47–49 De Beauvoir Road, Reading, Berkshire, RG1 5NR. It is anticipated that the archive will be deposited with Oxfordshire Museums Service in due course.

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Introduction

This report documents the results of an archaeological watching brief carried out at the former petrol filling station, High Street, Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxfordshire (SU 5788 9410) (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by Mr John Spratley of Spratley and Woodfield, Architects and Designers, Overy Farm, Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxfordshire, OX10 7JU, on behalf Country Visions OK Limited, c/o Bower and Bailey Solicitors, Anchor House, 269 Banbury Road, Summertown, Oxford, OX2 7JF.

Planning permission has been granted (app. no. P00/W/0865) by South Oxfordshire District Council for the demolition of the existing filling station and the construction of new housing with garages. A programme of archaeological work in the form of a field evaluation and mitigation measures was required as part of the planning condition. This was in accordance with the Department of the Environment’s Planning Policy Guidance, *Archaeology and Planning* (PPG16 1990) and the District’s policies on archaeology. The evaluation was carried out in May 2001 and revealed complex deposits of Roman date (Coles 2001). Following a detailed consideration of the impact of the proposed new development on the archaeological deposits on the site, a scheme of minimal archaeological investigation was drawn up and agreed with Mr Paul Smith, County Archaeological Officer, Oxfordshire County Council. The foundation design was for piles and ground beams with the latter set no more than c. 0.45m below the existing ground level. This formation level was at or about the same depth at which the archaeological deposits lay, beneath modern made ground as identified in the earlier evaluation. As such the impact on archaeological levels was thought likely to be minimal. The archaeological fieldwork therefore was limited to supervising the digging of the foundation trenches, hand excavation of any deposits which were present above the ground beam formation level, and mapping of the deposits which were to remain preserved *in situ*.

The fieldwork was undertaken by Sarah Coles and Clare Challis on the 25th–29th April 2002. The site code is HSD01/36. The archive is currently held by Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd, 47–49 De Beauvoir Road, Reading, and will be deposited with Oxfordshire Museums Service in due course, with the accession code OXCMS:2001.48.
Location, topography and geology

Dorchester-on-Thames is situated south-east of Oxford, north of the River Thames and west of its tributary the Thame. The site is located on the western side of the High Street opposite the Abbey. The plot of land in question is irregularly shaped and covers an area of 400sq. m (Fig. 2). According to geological maps (BGS 1980) the underlying geology is First (Flood Plain) Terrace deposits and this was confirmed during the evaluation which revealed a brickearth overlying gravel. The site lies approximately 50m above Ordnance Datum.

Archaeological background

The site is located in the historic core of Dorchester, and within the Roman, later Saxon and medieval town (Munby and Rodwell 1975). There have been several excavations, evaluations and watching briefs nearby (e.g. Frere 1962; Torrance and Durden 1998) which have provided specific details. The Roman town was founded in the 1st century AD and may have been a replacement for the Iron Age oppidum at Dyke Hills, just to the west. The Roman town was originally fortified by a bank and ditch and was subsequently walled. The environs of Dorchester were an important focus of early Saxon settlement and became the setting for an Abbey c. AD 635. The importance of the settlement declined in late Saxon times and into medieval times relative to the neighbouring towns of Abingdon and Wallingford.

An entry in the county Sites and Monuments Record for an area known as Rotten Row, to the west of the site, records the finding of skeletons, which may indicate the presence of a Saxon or medieval cemetery.

The earlier evaluation on the site involved the digging of two trenches which revealed a dense area of archaeological deposits and features cutting the natural geology. At least 17 features were identified (although not all were excavated), several of which were intercutting. All of the excavated deposits appeared to be of early Roman date (1st or 2nd century AD), and surface and spoilheap finds suggested that this was also the likely date for the remainder of the deposits revealed. The features excavated were relatively rich in artefacts, with pottery, faunal remains, building materials, oyster shell, glass, and metalwork being recovered. Finds of later Roman and post-medieval date were few, and those of Saxon or medieval date were absent. Deep stratigraphy in the form of accumulated layers was not revealed, and this absence, coupled with the surprising shallowness of the overburden (<0.45m) suggests that this area had been truncated and levelled during construction of the filling station.
Objectives and methodology

The purpose of the watching brief was to supervise excavation of the ground beam trenches down to their formation level, record any archaeological deposits present and excavate any deposits which survived above the formation level. The ground beam trenches were to be 0.7m wide and dug under continuous archaeological supervision, using a JCB-type machine fitted with a toothless bucket. Where archaeological features were certainly or probably present the stripped areas were to be cleaned using the appropriate hand tools.

Results

The foundation trenches for the new houses and garage were dug in the positions shown on Figure 3. This revealed a wide range of deposits. Several of the trenches (e.g., Fig. 3, J) were of insufficient depth to expose archaeologically relevant levels. Other features observed, in fact the majority that could be defined, were unambiguously of modern (19th–20th-century date) either from the finds in their upper layers or their stratigraphic position. Several deposits, such as the fuel tanks, could be specifically related to the former use of the site as a filling station.

Archaeological features, other than those already identified in the previous evaluation, comprised three cut features, and two layers. Trench L revealed a wall composed of limestone blocks. There was no direct dating evidence but it is possible that it represents a previous site boundary wall of post-medieval date.

The base of several groundbeam trenches exposed an extensive layer (66) of yellow sandy clay across much of the site. This layer was cut by the modern pits but was otherwise undated. A second layer (65) located towards the southern end of the house plot is unambiguously of archaeological interest as it was cut by archaeological features (6, 7 and 8). This layer consisted of dark orange-brown clayey silt flecked with charcoal. Limited excavation of the upper fill of pit 6 (61) produced 8 sherds of Roman pottery including samian (1 sherd), colour coated ware (3) and sandy grey ware (4). Feature (7) was an undated gully and feature (8) was a large pit, again undated. A few more sherds of Roman pottery (16 sherds in all, mainly sandy greyware but also one sherd from a samian dish and tiny sherds of red colour-coated ware) were recovered from modern deposits or unstratified from spoil.

Conclusion

The combination of this watching brief and the mitigation strategy by foundation design has been successful in minimizing the impact of the new building work on the archaeology on the site. The ground beams will have no
significant impact on the buried archaeology as it has been confirmed that the beams lie mostly within the modern made ground on the site. The effects of piling will also be minor.

Archaeologically, the fieldwork has revealed little new, merely confirming the results of the evaluation, exposing only three new features: a probable Roman pit, and another pit and a gully of unknown date, all of which will be preserved in situ. The finds recovered add little to the information from the evaluation, and cannot even provide a more than a probable Roman date for pit 6.

References

Coles, S, 2001, Former filling station, High Street, Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxfordshire, An archaeological evaluation, Thames Valley Archaeological Services report 01/36, Reading
Frere, S S, 1962, ‘Excavations at Dorchester-on-Thames’, *Archaeol J* 119, 114–49
Torrance, L and Durden, T, 1998, ‘Roman and medieval finds from St Birinus Primary School, Dorchester, Oxfordshire’, *Oxoniensia* LXIII, 187–97
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Figure 1. Location of site within Dorchester and Oxfordshire.

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Figure 2. Location of site.
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Figure 3. Plan of site showing excavated footings and location of previous evaluation trenches and recorded archaeological features.